

# Testimony

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January 17 2023

We believe much of what we believe because we accept what we have been told by other people, because we believe them. To take some ordinary examples: I believe that the railway station is further down this road because I accept what a passer-by just told me; I believe that I was born in Suffolk because I accept what my mother told me; I believe that finches inhabit the Galápagos Islands because I accept what my biology teacher told me. Philosophers think of cases of this sort, in which we believe things by accepting what we are told, or what people say or write, as cases of beliefs formed on the bases of *testimony*.

Epistemologists have discussed a wide range of questions about such beliefs, of which the following three, interrelated questions are especially central:

1. Can someone's testimony ever be a source of knowledge, so that some of the things we believe because we accept what we are told are things we also know?
2. If testimony can be a source of knowledge, what account should be given of how it can be?
3. How does the acceptance of testimony relate to other putative sources of knowledge?

We'll consider those questions in turn, noting some points at which they connect.

## **1. Can someone's testimony ever be a source of knowledge?**

A fair amount of what people say to us is surely false, either because they are mistaken or because they wish to mislead us. Does the degree of unreliability that testimony exhibits mean that it cannot be a source of knowledge? We might also hold that if we are to know something, then we must have good evidence or good reasons in favour of believing it. Even if the person who tells us something has such evidence or reasons, it is not obvious that their telling us what they do provides us with evidence or reasons. If that is right, then

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful to Thomas Crowther and Hemdat Lerman for comments on an earlier draft.

unless the fact that someone has told us something is itself good evidence or good reason for believing it, beliefs we form by accepting testimony will not be appropriately supported by evidence or reasons. Does a requirement that knowledgeable beliefs must be based on good evidence or good reasons mean that testimony cannot be a source of knowledge?

Whether or not we can see a clear response to sceptical queries of the sort just mentioned, we might think that the sheer ubiquity of our dependence on testimony provides us with grounds for holding that it *must* be a source of knowledge. The extent to which our body of beliefs is shaped by accepting what we are told means that scepticism about testimony would be almost as destructive of our ordinary claims to know things as would scepticism about the senses as a source of knowledge. (Although I can tell that there is, say, a finch here by seeing it, without being told, my ability to recognise what I see as a finch depends on my accepting things that I was told by others. Our dependence on testimony is deep and wide. (Coady 1992.))

Although that isn't a decisive reason for holding that testimony can be a source of knowledge, it is a good reason for trying to explain how it can be. Thus, many philosophers have taken it to be an important task to explain how testimony can be a source of knowledge. In doing so, they have tried to explain what is wrong with the sorts of motivations for scepticism that we sketched above. Similar considerations figure in the assessment of specific accounts of how we can acquire knowledge by accepting testimony. If a proposed account cannot explain how testimony can be a source of knowledge in approximately the same wide range of cases in which this is allowed by ordinary thought, then that has been taken to be a reason for rejecting the account.

## **2. What account should be given of how testimony can be a source of knowledge?**

Given an apparent conflict or tension between our willingness to treat testimony as a source of knowledge and sceptical challenges, the defender of testimony as a source of knowledge has two broad options. First, they might accept principles guiding the sceptic's challenges—for example, that knowledgeable belief must be based on good reasons—and then question the sceptical application of such principles by trying to explain how, despite initial appearances, beliefs gained from testimony can accord with them. Second, they might reject the principles operative in the challenges, either on independent grounds—for example, because those principles do not apply to other sources of knowledge—or simply because they exclude knowledge by testimony, and so exclude too much of what we ordinarily take to be knowledge.

In considering these alternatives, let's focus on the principle that if a belief is to be a piece of knowledge, then it must be based on

sufficiently good evidence or reasons. Focusing on that principle, the first option—accepting the principle—depends on explaining how forming a belief by accepting what someone tells one can be based on sufficiently good—that is, knowledge-sustaining—evidence or reasons to believe what they tell one. The second option—rejecting the principle—depends on explaining how forming a belief by accepting what someone tells one can be way of coming to know even though the belief formed in this way is not based on sufficiently good evidence or reasons to believe what one it told.

Philosophers sometimes classify accounts that take the first option as forms of *reductionism* and accounts that take the second option as forms of *non-reductionism* (see, e.g., Leonard 2021). However, these labels are used in various, non-equivalent ways. For example, there is another use on which a view is classified as reductionist just in case it holds not only that testimonial knowledge depends on sufficiently good evidence or reasons but also that such evidence or reasons must derive ultimately from sources other than testimony—for example, from some combination of perception, memory, and inference (Coady 1992; Fricker 1995; Gelfert 2014: 95–143). This use better fits the ideas of reduction since, according to it, testimonial reasons reduce to non-testimonial reasons.) Such views thereby take a stand not only on question 2, but also on question 3, concerning the relations of testimonial and other sources of knowledge. (Views of this sort are often linked historically with Hume (1740, 1748).)

On that way of classifying views, it would be natural to expect *non-reductionist* views to hold that testimonial knowledge does *not* depend on evidence or reasons that derive only from non-testimonial sources. (Views of this sort are often linked historically with Reid (1764, 1785). However, some schemes of classification retain the idea from the first scheme that non-reductionist views reject the demand for sufficiently good evidence or reasons for accepting what one is told. Those schemes make space for *hybrid* views, according to which reasons are required for accepting testimony (and so they are not, according to this scheme, non-reductionist views) but the evidence or reasons need not be based on non-testimonial sources or need not be sufficiently good evidence or reasons to explain, without supplementation, how beliefs formed in that way can be cases of knowledge (and so they are not, according to this scheme, reductionist views). Hybrid views then differ from other non-reductionist views in allowing that one's reasons for accepting testimony are often supplemented by other features of testimonial transactions in a way that makes it possible to explain how beliefs formed by accepting testimony can often amount to knowledge.

One general challenge facing many forms of reductionism is that there are lots of cases in which we form beliefs by accepting what people tell us and take it that in doing so we are coming to know and yet in which we do not seem to have sufficiently good—i.e., knowledge-sustaining—evidence or reasons for accepting what they

tell us. Consider requesting and accepting directions from a stranger in a strange land. This is something we often do and, in doing so, we often take ourselves to acquire knowledge about where things are. And yet we do not seem to have much by way of evidence or reasons for thinking either that the people we ask are competent to provide us with directions or that they mean to inform us, rather than mislead. (Coady 1992; McDowell 1994.)

We might have some general reasons for thinking that where people respond positively to such requests, they are typically competent and typically aim to be helpful. However, it is far from clear that such general reasons are sufficient to support knowledge. One might have similar general reasons, in advance of speaking to such a stranger, for thinking that they are local (e.g., “most people around here are”). And yet one would hardly think that those reasons put one in a position to know that this individual is local.

Furthermore, forms of reductionism restricted to non-testimonial evidence or reasons face an additional challenge. Insofar as we have general reasons to expect the stranger to speak truthfully, those reasons plausibly depend on testimonial knowledge. For example, our general reasons for thinking that people who provide directions are generally competent and sincere plausibly depend not only on cases in which we have confirmed what people tell us first-hand, by non-testimonial means, but also cases in which confirmation depends on others’ testimony. If we exclude testimonial confirmation from our general reasons for believing strangers, those reasons will seem even weaker and so even less able to sustain the acquisition of knowledge. (Coady 1992; Fricker 1995.)

Non-reductionist or hybrid views can potentially avoid such challenges since they do not require the knowledgeable acceptance of testimony to be based on evidence or reasons able, without supplementation, to sustain knowledge. One sort of challenge that some such views have been thought to face is to avoid the appearance that they license *gullibility*. The concern here is that accepting pieces of testimony without any reasons, or without sufficiently good reasons, will often lead to accepting testimony from the incompetent or mendacious, and so will often lead to accepting falsehoods. Accepting what one is told in that way as a matter of policy would be a way of manifesting the vice of gullibility. (Fricker 1994.)

A related concern is that even in those cases in which the testimony one accepted was true, its being so might not be established by one’s evidence or reasons for accepting what one was told. From one’s own perspective, as shaped by the evidence or reasons one has for believing as one does, it would therefore be left open whether what one accepted was true. (Compare here believing, of some arbitrary stranger, that they are local even where, by luck, one is right.) What the proponent of this sort of view needs to explain, then, is how one in that type of situation can nonetheless count as coming to know. And they need to do so in a way that does not concede too much to

scepticism by allowing that testimonial knowledge need not meet general conditions that apply to other cases of knowing. (McDowell 1994.)

### **3. How does testimony relate to other putative sources of knowledge?**

We have just considered one way in which the acceptance of testimony might be thought to relate to other putative sources of knowledge. According to some forms of reductionism about testimony, the epistemological standing of beliefs formed by testimony derives entirely from the standing of the believer's other epistemological sources or resources: perception, memory, and inference. Now one sort of concern about reductionism is that it tends to underplay the contribution made to testimonial transactions by the speaker. In principle, one might have reasons for believing that what a speaker says is true in cases where the speaker has no such reasons, for example if one knew that the speaker reliably believes the negation of the truth but reliably seeks to mislead. Some non-reductionist views also seem to efface the speaker's contribution, for they claim that one is entitled to accept testimony without reasons, and so without any reasons made available by the speaker's testimony. By contrast, other non-reductionist views, especially hybrid views, seek to preserve the idea that the speaker's epistemological position contributes to the standing of testimonial beliefs.

Another ground for giving speakers' contributions a more significant role is this. It seems plausible to hold that knowledge that is passed from one person to another through testimony must have initially been acquired in other ways. For example, if I am to be able to inform you that there are finches about, that is either because I've seen the finches for myself or because another has told me. If it is because another had told me, then that other must have seen them or been told about them. And if we follow this sort of testimonial chain back, then it is plausible that we must ultimately come upon a speaker who saw for themselves that there were finches about. On this sort of view, testimony is related to other sources or resources as follows. Testimony is a means of *preserving* knowledge initially acquired by other means rather than a way of *generating* knowledge *ab initio*. It is therefore akin to propositional or semantic memory; and it is unlike, but dependent on, other non-testimonial sources, like perception. (See, e.g., Burge 1993.)

On such *preservative* views of testimony, the status of a belief formed by accepting testimony depends crucially on the statuses of other beliefs in the chain of testimony. It depends ultimately on the contribution to those statuses made by non-testimonial sources. Views will then divide about the specific ways in which the statuses of other beliefs contribute. On some views, the contribution will go via additional reasons that are made available to the recipient of testimony. On other views, the epistemological status of the testimony will play its role in affecting the status of the recipient's

beliefs without making additional reasons available to the recipient. On the former approach, the status of the recipient's beliefs is dependent only on reasons available to them, and so such approaches are sometimes thought of as *internalist* or *individualist*. On the latter approach, the status of the recipient's beliefs is dependent on features of the testimonial chain that need not be available to them (or indeed any other individual in the chain) in the form of reasons for belief. Such approaches are therefore sometimes thought of as *externalist* or *anti-individualist*.

We saw that all reductionist views, and some non-reductionist views, can be accused of underplaying the contribution made to testimonial transactions by the speaker's epistemological standing. A slightly more general complaint is that these views tend to efface the contribution made by features of the testimonial chain beyond the recipient. A version of that charge has also been brought against some forms of preservative view. A mirror image of that charge is also sometimes brought against preservative views: they tend to underplay the contribution that the *recipient* of testimony makes to the status of testimonial beliefs.

According to the most straightforward form of preservative view, if one is to acquire knowledge by accepting a speaker's testimony, then the speaker must already possess that knowledge. The idea is that testimony allows for, and only allows for, the preservation of a piece of knowledge from one person to another. On this view, it is possible to acquire knowledge by accepting what a speaker tells one only if the speaker has the knowledge.

To see an objection to the straightforward view, consider one of our earlier examples, my knowledge that finches inhabit the Galápagos Islands. In fact, I acquired that knowledge by accepting testimony from a knowledgeable source. But suppose that I had instead formed the belief by accepting testimony from an unusual teacher. This teacher misguidedly believes that what appear to be Galápagos finches are in fact cleverly disguised drones. However, their commitment to the demands of their role as teacher mean that they reliably report only what they correctly take to be orthodox scientific opinion. Even though my immediate source, the misguided teacher, did not believe that there were finches on the Galápagos Islands, and so did not know that there were, it is plausible that the belief I formed by accepting what they told me was a case of knowledge. Plausibly, the normality and reliability of accepting what teachers tell one, together with the fact that this teacher's testimony reliably and normally expressed others' knowledge, means that my belief can count as a piece of knowledge. If that judgement is correct, then the most straightforward preservative account is wrong. (Lackey 1999.)

A less straightforward preservative account can withstand the objection. On this view, what matters is not the status of the speaker's belief, but rather the status of individual's beliefs in the wider testimonial chain. What is required is that at least one

individual in the chain knew that there were finches on the Galápagos Islands and their knowledge was preserved to the present recipient via normal and reliable mechanisms. However, the less straightforward preservative view is subject to a closely related objection. Suppose that instead of directly reproducing what they took to be orthodox opinion, the misguided teacher based her testimony on a combination of what they correctly took to be orthodox views about the distinguishing features of finches (which they falsely believed were really features of drones) together with their observations of things on the Galápagos Islands which have those features. Although knowledge figures in the chain, it comprises knowledge of the distinguishing features of finches together with knowledge that these things, on the Galápagos Islands, have those features. So, we can suppose that no one in this testimonial chain knew that there were Galápagos finches. Nonetheless, it is plausible that one could acquire knowledge by accepting the teacher's testimony. (Graham 2006.)

The objections to this point leave space for a more attenuated preservative account, on which preserved knowledge must be possessed by the testimonial *chain* even though it need not be possessed by any *individual* link in the chain. Such a view would include at least two controversial commitments: first, that a number of individuals can collectively know something even though no individual amongst that number knows it; and second, in cases in which a number of individuals have such collective knowledge, an individually ignorant member of that number can make the knowledge available to an individual by telling it to them. (See, e.g., Burge 2013; Faulkner 2018; Lackey 2014.)

In addition, and this is the basis of the mirror-image charge mentioned earlier, it might be held that cases like that of the misguided teacher are cases in which testimony can sponsor the generation of entirely new knowledge. In that case, a natural suggestion would be that this is possible only insofar as the recipient plays a significant role in generating that knowledge. Otherwise, it becomes hard to see how they can come to know from a speaker who is ignorant. We saw that reductionism, and some forms of non-reductionism, err in effacing the role of the epistemic status of the testimonial chain in underwriting testimonial knowledge. The present suggestion is that other non-reductionist or hybrid views—namely, preservative views—err in effacing the role of the status of the recipient's acceptance of testimony in underwriting testimonial knowledge. If that is right, then an adequate account of how testimony can be a source of knowledge will need to attend to the complementary, and interconnected, roles of both recipients and testimonial chains. (See, e.g., Faulkner 2000, 2011; Lackey 2006, 2008; McDowell 1994.)

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